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### Abstract

Eight months after leaving Portsmouth, and two since the Cape of Good Hope, young Midshipman George Raper must have been very glad to see the gentle, bleached hills of New Holland. From the deck of HMS Sirius, flagship of the eleven ships now known as the First Fleet and carrying the convicts and marines who were to establish the new British colony, Raper may well have spotted the seabirds that signalled the fleet's approach to land. Birds would provide him with recreation, companionship and sustenance in the new colony and feature among the artwork that forms his major legacy.

PENNY OLSEN

## Raper's Bountiful Birds: A First Fleeter's Impressions of Australia's Avifauna

Eight months after leaving Portsmouth, and two since the Cape of Good Hope, young Midshipman George Raper must have been very glad to see the gentle, bleached hills of New Holland. From the deck of *HMS Sirius*, flagship of the eleven ships now known as the First Fleet and carrying the convicts and marines who were to establish the new British colony, Raper may well have spotted the seabirds that signalled the fleet's approach to land. Birds would provide him with recreation, companionship and sustenance in the new colony and feature among the artwork that forms his major legacy.

Raper began the voyage as an Able Seaman and studied navigation, cartography and topographical drawing with second-in-command Captain John Hunter and First Lieutenant William Bradley. The young trainee officer left few words, but his shipmates, including Hunter and Commander Arthur Phillip, give some indications of his experiences and avian influences.

Within days of the fleet joyfully gathering in Botany Bay on 20 January 1788, Phillip, soon to be the colony's first governor, moved the ships north to the more suitable Port Jackson, where they set about establishing a settlement at Sydney Cove, with 'the finest spring of water' and good anchorage (Phillip 33). First Fleet diarist and Captain of Marines, Watkin Tench, recorded that 'The general face of the country is certainly pleasing, being diversified with gentle ascents, and little winding valleys, covered for the most part in large spreading trees which afford a succession of leaves in all seasons' (Flannery 70). The heath land flora particularly impressed him: 'In those places where trees are scarce a variety of flowering shrubs abound, most of them entirely new to an European and surpassing in beauty, fragrance and number, all I ever saw in an uncultivated state'.

The birds too caught Tench's eye; they were: 'in great variety and of the most exquisite beauty of plumage, among which are the cockatoo, lory, and parakeet; but the bird which principally claims attention is a species of ostrich' (Flannery 72). The latter was the Emu (fig. 1), which Tench found 'tasted like beef'. It had 'wings ... so small as hardly to deserve the name', but the big birds left far behind the fleetest greyhounds and were 'so wild as to make shooting of them a matter of great difficulty' (73).

Other birds were also wary. 'A single snipe has been shot. Ducks, geese and other aquatic birds are often seen in large flocks, but are universally so shy that it is found difficult to shoot them', Tench remarked. 'The country, I am of the opinion, would abound with birds did not the natives, by perpetually setting fire

to the grass and bushes, destroy the greater part of the nests' (Flannery 241). Still, 'of the parrot tribe alone' Tench could 'count up from memory fourteen different sorts'. Hawks too were 'very numerous, so were quails'. While he found that 'Some of the smaller birds were very beautiful', they were 'not remarkable for either sweetness or variety of notes.' Hunter concurred; he had 'not found one with a pleasing note' (Hunter 1793 69).

Like Tench, Hunter was captivated by the number of lively, exotic parrots. 'With respect to the feathered tribe, the parrot prevails', he wrote 'all those of the parrot tribe, such as the macaw, cockatoo, lorey, green parrot and parroquets of different kinds and sizes, are clothed with the most beautiful plumage that can be conceived; it would require the pencil of an able limner to give a stranger an idea of them, for it is impossible by words to describe them' (Hunter 69). Hunter himself painted birds — he had 'a pretty turn for drawing' when it came to illustrating coastlines to advantage future navigators (White 79). However, the 'able limner' turned out to be eighteen-year-old Raper and Hunter apparently copied most of Raper's natural history work — a common practice at the time, in the absence of cameras and photocopiers.

Although it was also usual in the period to include natural history collectors and artists on voyages of exploration, there were none on the First Fleet, launched with the primary purpose of easing overcrowded British gaols and establishing a colony for strategic purposes and trade. Nevertheless, there was great interest in Britain's colonies and their natural productions, and books, especially illustrated books, about these far-flung places were eagerly awaited. Tench, Hunter, Bradley and Surgeon-General John White all published accounts of their time in the fledgling colony of New South Wales.

In his free time on land, Hunter studied the medicinal uses of the flora and, with encouragement from a naturalist friend, Thomas Wilson in London, collected specimens, including examples of the fauna. Bradley too was an officer of 'more than common abilities' (White 79) who has left capable watercolours of coastlines, landscapes and records of first meetings with aborigines. Both officers, Hunter and Bradley, were very able draughtsman but neither had the artistic ability of Raper. As noted art historian, Bernard Smith, has written, Raper's watercolours 'reveal a sensitive feeling for linear design and for the relationship of the image to pictorial space, qualities in which his work far surpasses all of the other First Fleet draughtsmen' (Smith & Wheeler 205).

At some stage Raper sketched the grey-green coastline and pale, jumbled sandstone blocks that mark the entrance to Sydney Cove and Port Jackson. His and Hunter's sketches show the *Sirius* at anchor in the harbour, in the background a well-wooded landscape thins out towards the shore where patches are cleared for a few tents and fenced fields. In those early months 'the principal business' was 'the clearing of land, cutting, grubbing and burning down trees' and other activities associated with setting up living quarters, farms and gardens' (Worgan 5).

In March 1788, the *Sirius* arrived back from Norfolk Island, having seeded a subordinate colony there. On the return journey they had discovered Lord Howe Island, 700 km north-east of Port Jackson. On the 9th March, Raper sketched the approach to the island group from several angles. There, as White chronicled on the ship's return to Port Jackson, the sailors 'found in great plenty a kind of fowl, being in general all white, with a red fleshy substance rising, like a cock's comb, from the head.... These not being birds of flight, nor in the least wild, the sailors ... easily struck them down with sticks'. There were 'also many birds of the dove kind, as tame as the former ... some ... brought alive' to Port Jackson (94).

These were the White Gallinule and the White-throated Pigeon (figs 2 & 3). Raper painted both — the gallinule possibly from a specimen skin. He may have drawn the pigeon from the captives brought back on the ship. Both paintings are dated 1790, obviously completed later when he was stranded on Norfolk Island. The pigeon was not recognised by science until 1915, when ornithologist Gregory Mathews viewed Raper's painting in the British Museum and realised it depicted a new bird, a unique subspecies of the White-throated Pigeon. Raper's watercolours are among the scant tangible evidence of these birds' existence: the unwitting gallinule was hunted to extinction by 1834 and the pigeon by 1853.

As the beginnings of a settlement began to take shape, the surrounding area of Port Jackson was explored, always with an eye for fresh produce. In March or April, White's party were surprised by a 'bird [that] is so very singular in its several characteristics ... the bill seems most allied to a hornbill, but the legs are those of a toucan, and the tongue is more like a crow than any other ... the toes are placed two before and two behind, as in the parrot or toucan genus' (98). White called the unusual find the Anomalous Hornbill and it is now known to be the spectacular Channel-billed Cuckoo (fig. 4). The next day 'the Wattled Bee-eater ... fell in our way' (Red Wattlebird), seemingly it was 'peculiar to New Holland, and ... undoubtedly a species which has not hitherto been described' (98). On a salt-water lagoon they came across nine birds that 'resembled the *rara avis* of the ancients, a *black swan*' (95). The officers fired at them, but they were too distant. White noted, with some relief, a familiar flash of white on the outer wing as they took flight. They also saw what White took to be the Banksian Cockatoo (Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo) 'met with in several parts of New Holland' (96). He reported that it differed 'in some few particulars' from the usual description. It was in fact a Glossy Black-Cockatoo (fig. 5), then unknown to science.

Although the birds were new to him, White was aware that several had been collected on earlier voyages and sent back to England where they were formally described. The exploring party came across birds they recognised as Great Brown Kings Fisher (Laughing Kookaburra), Gold-winged Pigeon (Common Bronzewing) and a goatsucker 'remarkable for the excessive wideness of the mouth' (Australian Owlet-nightjar) the latter the Australian representative of a group said to suck the teats of goats, a proposition that White rightly noted was 'wildly improbable' (157). The Red-shouldered Paroquet (Swift Parrot),

however, was identified as new to science, and hence bears the scientific name White assigned to it (177). His Holland Creeper (White-cheeked Honeyeater) was also new, but overlooked as such.

Raper was to sketch many of these birds, especially the more striking species and the most colourful. A bias towards the larger and more flamboyant of the birds may simply have been what was readily shot for the pot, rather than a preference of Raper's. As Tench recalled, the pot or spit received everything they could catch or kill. Certainly, the big birds gave Raper something more substantial to fill the page and he captured them better. Regardless of size, the brilliant bodies seem to have unleashed in Raper an eye for form and colour, if not an interest in natural history.

His art must have been an escape from the hardships: scurvy returned and there was a 'want of fresh provisions and vegetables and almost constant exposure to the vicissitudes of a variable climate' as Tench remembered (91). There were floggings and hangings, drought and fire. Relations with the Aborigines were poor. The 1788 wheat crop failed. In October 1788, in desperation, the *Sirius*, captained by Hunter, and with Midshipman Raper, sailed for provisions to the Cape of Good Hope. Hunter took a novel route and arrived in record time of 91 days.

In Cape Town, while stores were being negotiated and loaded, Raper and Hunter probably had some free time. There was a menagerie to visit and like-minded people to meet. Among them was Robert Jacob Gordon, a British officer stationed at the Cape from 1777 until 1795, who was said to be very hospitable and 'a gentleman of extensive information in most branches of natural history' (Rookmaaker 64). Gordon amassed a collection of natural history specimens and drawings both on his own expeditions and from visitors to the colony. Governor Phillip was a friend and after Gordon's suicide recommended the manuscripts and drawings held by his widow to Sir Joseph Banks, Britain's leading scientist of the day, who had an abiding interest in the natural history of the Colony of New South Wales. Foremost amongst Gordon's estate was a collection of natural history paintings, now known as the Gordon Atlas and housed in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Amongst the works are three attributable to Raper, some almost identical to those in the Alexander Turnbull Library: an Emu, Brolga and Jabiru.

Raper also left his calling card amongst the drawings of Francis Masson. Masson was a botanist who collected for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Masson spent two periods at the Cape and assembled large folios of drawings. His second stay, 1786–1795, corresponded with the visit of the *Sirius* and Hunter tried to encourage him to spend time in New South Wales as an agricultural advisor, but he declined.

There is speculation whether Masson himself was the artist of any of the works in his collection or whether Gordon or some of his artists may have been the primary artists. Masson's second collection has been lost, but Raper copied two of the paintings, presumably in 1789. Among the 'Collections of views/sketches and natural history in a voyage to Botany Bay in 1787–1788–1789–1790–1791 by Geo. Raper' in London's Natural History Museum are a beautiful Gemsbok

and a Cassowary, both titled in Raper's distinctive lettering: 'from an original in the possession of Mr. Mason'. One of Raper's shipmates noted a Cassowary in the menagerie, presumably from New Guinea — the species was not then known from Australia.

Mementoes of the dash to the Cape are also found among the Raper collection in the National Library of Australia. Three African birds — a Secretarybird, Blue Crane and Eurasian Crane — were probably sketched from birds in the Cape Town zoo. The three works are uncaptioned, unsigned and have identical borders which do not resemble Raper's edgings. When Raper's bordered his finished works he apparently always titled and signed them. Compositionally, he often put birds on a 'pedestal': any 'ground' was used as a base to the main figure and rarely spanned the painting as in these three African works. Nor do they show Raper's strong yet refined use of paint. They may have been a gift from Gordon or Masson. Possibly Raper also took with him similar paintings, now lost, of the Gemsbok and Cassowary and copied them at a later date. Indeed, Raper's Cassowary is signed and dated 1790, and the Gemsbok 1792, both well after the Cape Town visit.

The *Sirius* returned to Port Jackson on 6th May 1789 with welcome supplies. In June until November that year, the ship was moved to Careening Cove (now Mosman Bay) where the crew repaired storm damage incurred on the homeward voyage off the south coast of Tasmania, and leaks detected in Cape Town. Many of the Sydney paintings seem to have been done during these five months, as indicated by the plants, which are mostly spring flowering.

Among the multitude of birds Raper painted the remainder of that relatively leisurely year were: Collared Sparrowhawk; Grey Goshawk (fig. 6); Buff-banded Rail (fig. 7); Masked Lapwing; Common Bronzewing; Brush Bronzewing; Glossy Black-Cockatoo; Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo; Sulphur-crested Cockatoo; Swift Parrot; King Parrot; Crimson Rosella; Ground Parrot (fig. 8); Channel-billed Cuckoo; Laughing Kookaburra; Southern Emu-wren and Bassian Thrush; Noisy Friarbird (fig. 9); Blue-faced Honeyeater (fig. 10); White-naped Honeyeater; Eastern Whipbird and Crested Shrike-tit. Others, undated, also thought to have been painted that year include: Black Swan; Flesh-footed Shearwater; Reef Egret; Nankeen Night Heron; bittern (?); sandpiper; Silver Gull; Brown Goshawk; Brolga (?); Barn Owl; Owlet Nightjar; Tawny Frogmouth; Rainbow Lorikeet; Eastern Rosella; Fan-tailed Cuckoo; Sacred Kingfisher; Spotted Pardalote; Dollarbird; Variegated Fairy-wren; Noisy Miner; Yellow-faced Honeyeater; New Holland Honeyeater; Eastern Spinebill; Flame Robin; Golden Whistler; Grey Shrike-thrush; Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike; White-breasted Woodswallow; and Red-browed Finch. These were all at least seasonally common birds at the time.

If Raper visited Sydney today, he might draw Feral Pigeons, Spotted Turtle-Doves, Sparrows, Starlings, Skylarks and Blackbirds, White Ibis, and a few of the old guard, including Rainbow Lorikeets, Crimson Rosellas and Noisy Miners.

The Ground Parrot, Emu and Brolga are no longer found close to the city. The Ground Parrot, considered good eating by the First Fleeters, is listed as vulnerable to extinction nationally. The Swift Parrot, once plentiful in years of profuse flowering, is now a rare, intermittent visitor, and Endangered nationally. The Brush Bronzewing and Nankeen Night Heron are uncommon, and Blue-faced Honeyeaters, so common in the early years, are rarely seen today. The nocturnal Australian Owlet-nightjar was commonly seen by First Fleeters, perhaps because the trees in which it roosted by day were felled; few would know it in today's metropolis. The Red-backed Fairy-wren (fig. 11) has not been seen in the Sydney area since the early days of European settlement, when Raper and others drew it. Whereas the pterodactyl-like Channel-billed Cuckoos that so fascinated First Fleeters returned to the city in the 1990s after decades of scarcity. Blue-Bellied Parrots (Rainbow Lorikeets), 'in great plenty at Botany Bay and Port Jackson' (White 96), are among the few species to have continued to thrive.

Repairs to the *Sirius* were finished in Sydney Cove, but the colony was again short of food. In early March 1790, Governor Phillip dispatched the *Sirius* and her sister ship, the *Supply*, to Norfolk Island. Aboard were some 80 marines and officers, including Raper 'a very promising young midshipman' (Phillip 47), and 200 convicts; the latter Phillip hoped would be able to support themselves on the island.

With its reefs and unsheltered access, Norfolk Island is a difficult place to land. Hunter appears to have been misinformed about conditions for landing and the *Sirius* was swept against a sunken reef at Sydney Bay. The loss of the ship was a disaster.

Initially, a great deal of time and effort went into salvaging provisions and equipment. Raper saved his painting case from the sea and painted the 'Melancholy wreck', masts lobbed and sails flailing, most likely as evidence for the anticipated court martial. Bradley also painted the stranded ship and Hunter appears to have copied Raper's views.

The *Supply* returned to Port Jackson, but relief was slow in coming for the crew of the *Sirius*. For once there are some words from Raper on his experiences. In an extract from a letter among the papers of Banks, Raper writes almost cheerfully of his months on the island. It was not until near rescue that the 500 inhabitants were facing starvation, so his time there may have been quite pleasant — digging, planting and tending a vegetable garden, and painting.

The few surviving pages from Raper's lengthy letter detail the role that birds played in sustaining the stranded men; the natural history aspects would have been of great interest to Banks and were presumably why he came to have that section of the letter. As Raper explained: 'No doubt you will wonder when I tell you that the same tasks were performed on these very, very reduced Rations, as when on full allowance; but this was owing to a divine and providential resource from and about Mount Pitt, which place supplied the whole Settlement with Birds; from the latter end of March, till the middle of August. The bird is a specie



of the petrel which comes to this island about the beginning of March, when they burrow under Ground for laying' (77).

The petrels seemed limitless. 'They were, at first, taken out of their holes in the Day, but, soon after, we found Night to be the Time for slaughter, as our whole Horizon (in the Woods), was then covered with them, and there was no walking without kicking them before you' (Raper 77). The loose earth on Mt Pitt made access to their one metre long nest burrows easy. 'About the middle of April there were vast numbers of Eggs taken, both from the Holes and Birds, which, if possible, were now thicker than ever'. From May to June 'eggs and birds were plentiful ... there was no scarcity in any part of the Town, and [they] were bartered at a very cheap rate' (78).

Governor King attempted to regulate the harvest: 'On the 19<sup>th</sup> April the Birds became so very plentiful (and our stores so lean) the Governor sent out a conditional Order, that if every person would give up half a pound of his salt that Week, they might kill and bring home as many Birds from the Mount as they pleased (as long as it did not interfere with their Work)' (Raper 78). Before this they had been restricted, 'by allowing only so many Persons to go out at a time, and that quantity issued out by the Store Keeper to every individual'. The new arrangement was agreed to and 'instantly took place', and Raper wrote 'the slaughter, and nightly havock is, beyond description' (78). Raper himself became a dab hand at collecting 'Birds or Cabbages (the heart of the Palm Tree)' (79). In May, the Governor, increasingly worried at the waste, put a stop to the killing of birds only to collect their developing egg.

In his letter, Raper enclosed drawings of the unfortunate petrel (fig. 12) and a 'fat and firm' fish much esteemed but scarce because there were few days suitable for fishing (79). The latter — a wonderfully bold, modern work — he titled the 'Snapper of Norfolk Island' (fig. 13).

He described the island as rich-soiled and well-watered. Their gardens grew well, he said, but grubs attacked them and so did birds: 'the Paroquets [Green Parrot, now Endangered] make vast havock, devouring the Seeds of all Grain, as well as most of the Garden Seeds; and small Spots would be entirely consumed, were they not well watched' (81). They took action against the marauding birds, which, he wrote: 'fly in great Flocks, and are so tame, that, with common caution, you may knock them down with a stick'. Still, Raper explained, 'in spite of these Evils (thus far) there is no cause of complaint'. His main worry was the anticipated inquest over the loss of the *Sirius*: 'I fear, I dread the consequences!' (85).

The stately Norfolk Island Pines he found magnificent but unsuitable for masts as hoped by Captain James Cook on discovery of the island in 1777. 'There is some little variety of Birds. A Parrot, Paroquet, Pidgeon, Dove, Hawk and Owl, with many small birds. The Parrot is very curios; the Paroquet common, with no great share of Beauty: The Pidgeon beautiful, the Dove delicate, the Owl and Hawk quite common. Amongst the small Birds, there is but one worthy of note,

which is not unlike a Robin, having a rich vermilion Breast. The only quadruped is a Rat, and those rather diminutive' (83).

On the subtropical island, Raper seems to have found time to finish some of his paintings and rework and refine others (Red-backed Fairy-wren and Sacred Kingfisher, King Parrot, Australian Pelican from Port Jackson and the two Lord Howe birds); he also painted some of the novel fauna of the island. Several of these paintings, bordered, titled and signed, are now held in the Natural History Museum, London. Some of the apparent 'originals' or arguably less-polished versions are in the Alexander Turnbull Collection and the National Library of Australia. Many of the island's common birds he drew are now extinct — the Grey-headed Thrush (fig. 14) — or in such low numbers that they are Endangered — Scarlet Robin and Providence Petrel. Intriguingly, Hunter seemingly copied so many of Raper's paintings that his Norfolk Island Kaka (described by Raper as 'very curios'), New Zealand Pigeon, Norfolk Island Ground Dove, all endemic to Norfolk Island and now extinct, hint at Raper paintings of these species yet to be discovered.

After five months of slaughter, on 3rd August, fellow castaway Bradley noted that the few surviving petrel chicks were about to fledge. In the nick of time, in mid August, relief arrived from the mainland. Raper was not unaware of the serendipity involved: 'It is worthy of Remark that these Birds [Providence Petrels] were coming in when our sad and melancholy catastrophe happened. And were very scarce at arrival of relief' (78). He reported that at the time the relief vessel arrived their gardens were flourishing, with potatoes, French beans and fine cabbages soon ready to be harvested. Indeed, he wrote that they were fortunate, 'all our men keeping health to the last' (78).

Bradley took a more jaundiced view, describing the situation in early August, just prior to rescue, as 'distressed' and complaining that 'it is unaccountable what could have kept him [Gov. Phillip] from relieving us sooner' (209). He also cautioned future visitors to the island that 'The Birds which so providentially afforded us subsistence ... cannot again be expected for some years, from the vast number of Eggs and young Birds that were destroyed and the ground in which they burrowed being torn up' (221). In fact, they never recovered. After nearly one hundred years of apparent absence, in 1985, a tiny population was discovered on Phillip Island (a small island in the three island Norfolk group) and has slowly increased since to perhaps one hundred birds — a meagre reminder of the tens of thousands that saved Raper and colleagues.

But, after a long, hot summer, conditions were just as grim at Port Jackson. The *Supply* and Raper arrived back in early February 1791, to a heatwave and water shortage. The previous December, as Tench had written, 'it felt like the blast of a heated oven ... the sky hazy, the sun gleaming through at intervals' (Flannery 232). By February, Governor Phillip was despairing of the hot wind and fires: 'Great numbers of parroquets were picked up under the trees' (Hunter 507). Flying Foxes appeared in immense numbers and 'many dropped down unable to

bear the burning winds.' It was not until March that the weather eased. By then Raper had departed the colony.

Raper, with Hunter and Bradley, had sailed almost immediately for England on a hired Dutch vessel, the hulking *Waaksamheyd*. As far as is known Raper made only one or two further bird paintings, the Cassowary and, perhaps, an Emu, though he continued with his coastlines and landscapes. Curiously, his Emu is dated 1791, finished either in the first month of that year or on his voyage back to England. Further trials and dangers were encountered on the journey — many of the crew died horribly from scurvy or the infamous Batavia fever.

On the 22nd April 1792, over a year after departing New South Wales, the ship arrived in Portsmouth, England, the officers to face court-martial for the loss of the ship. Despite their fears, they were honourably acquitted and, presumably, Raper, still only 22-years-old, was reunited with his family. In June 1793, following an examination of his *Sirius* journals, certification from Captains Phillip and Hunter as to his 'Diligence and Sobriety' and noting his ability to 'splice, knot, Reef a Sail', Raper was promoted to Lieutenant (Hindwood 1964 35–36).

And so Raper continued with his naval career, which was apparently uneventful compared with his Australian adventures. He died of unknown causes, in September 1796 at sea in the West Indies, as Commander of the cutter HMS *Expedition*. He was just 28. His will stated that he wished his 'Drawings papers and Books' be 'Put up in my Painting Case and delivered to my dearest and beloved Mother', the widowed Catherine (Hindwood 1964 36).

Raper's subjects covered topography, ethnography, mammals, reptiles, fish and plants, but it is the bird drawings that form his principal contribution to natural history. The first known is the Teneriffe Partridge dated 1787 and unfinished, yet it shows that he was already an accomplished and distinctive watercolourist. His last known is the powerful image of a Cassowary in 1792. This brief but productive period in his life leaves a picture of the avifauna of the first European settlements in Australia. Some of the paintings are especially significant because they are the only extant images, in some cases the only evidence, of species that are now extinct.

There is no indication that Raper intended to publish a memoir; there are no known journals, and few letters. He appears to have had little interest in the scientific study of nature and the description of new species, though some of his paintings have ably served that purpose. It seems likely that the antipodean beauties and oddities he encountered stirred his imagination and were drawn for pleasure during a challenging period of his young life, when he encountered starvation, floggings, drownings, lethal sickness, murder and madness. On Norfolk Island, birds sustained him in more ways than one. During the quiet times, particularly in harbour and when shipwrecked, his art would have helped him fill the days. Not least it likely pleased his mentor, Hunter; it cannot be a coincidence that after their travels together ended, Raper seems never to have painted another bird.

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Figure 1

George Raper

'Emu of Port Jackson' (with egg and detail of feather) 1791

Watercolour and ink 47.7 x 31.5 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15167

This is possibly the most scientific of Raper's natural history works. It shows the Emu's salient features of stunted wings, heavily scaled sturdy legs and three toed feet, and comes complete with a scale to indicate the bird's height, easily topping 7 feet. It also illustrates the characteristic double-shafted body feather 'of the Natural Size' and large blue 'Egg 5 inches x 3 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  from the only one yet seen'. As with many of Raper's works the drawing is framed with a thick black ink line and a triple-banded border, the central band of which is coloured with a pink wash and contains the title





Figure 2

George Raper

[The White Rail of Lord Howe Island] 1788–1790

Watercolour and ink 46.0 x 31.0 cm

Alexander Turnbull Library, Auckland E-327-f-022

This untitled, unsigned work is clearly in the style of Raper and shows the very large, tame, flightless White Gallinule, which was quite common on discovery of Lord Howe Island in 1788. Its closest relative is the Takahe of New Zealand. Some individuals were pure white, others had traces of purple-blue. When Lord Howe was settled by Europeans in the 1830s the trusting gallinule was no longer present, having been hunted to extinction by First Fleeters and subsequent visitors. Two specimen skins and Raper's paintings are all that remain.



Figure 3

George Raper

'Pigeon of Lord Howe Island' 1790

Watercolour and ink 48.7 x 32.2 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15172

One hundred and twenty-five years after Raper painted the unfortunate pigeon, it was recognised from his illustration as a unique subspecies of the White-Throated Pigeon. There are no known specimens and the last birds were seen in the 1850s. The drawing is signed with one of Raper's more creative signatures: 'GEO:RAPER'. Alone amongst the First Fleet artists, he used both Roman and Italic script, and a unique crossed 'I'.



Figure 4

George Raper

'Bird and Flower of Port Jackson' 1789

Watercolour and ink 48.2 x 32.3 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15138

The huge-billed, raucous-voiced Channel-billed Cuckoo (and flowering broom) is a summer visitor to Sydney, arriving August–September and departing March–April. Raper may have painted it (and other birds) from a specimen skin collected to take back to England for naturalists to identify the strange new species, the largest of the cuckoos. The species was to be first described from an engraving in Governor Phillip's account of the voyage to the new colony, published the year that Raper made his painting. As here, in his finished works Raper often added a flower for balance and interest, though the plant had little or no ecological importance to the bird.





Figure 5

George Raper

'Cockatoo of Port-Jackson' 1789

Watercolour and ink 47.7 x 31.9 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15160

The Glossy Black-Cockatoo, one of the many parrots that enchanted the First Fleeters, was not uncommon in 1788 but is now declining in numbers nationally and seldom seen in the Sydney region. A forest bird, the large billed parrot feeds mainly on she-oak seeds and has suffered from clearing of its habitat. Raper's flamboyant bird is a female, distinguished by the yellow plumaged head. It illustrates Raper's flair for bold shapes and clever use of colour.



Figure 6

George Raper

'White Hawke of Port Jackson' 1789

Watercolour and ink 48.6 x 32.8 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15158

The striking Grey Goshawk (white form) was noted by Raper to be 'Natural Size', indicating that it may have been the, smaller, male of the species. Today the hawk is patchily distributed in coastal forests and generally eschews the districts taken up by city and suburbs.



Figure 7

George Raper

'Bird of Port Jackson 1789

Watercolour and ink 44.4 x 31.8 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15145

Raper drew the Buff-banded Rail preening its feathers, one foot forward in a typical stance, suggesting that he was familiar with the live bird. It is a remarkably animated composition; at the time most artists drew birds posed stiffly on a branch, often from a lumpy stuffed specimen, and with little or no indication of typical behaviour. The rail now occurs uncommonly around Sydney, where Raper would have drawn it; he may also have encountered it on Norfolk Island.





Figure 8

George Raper

[Ground Parrot] c. 1790

Watercolour and ink 46.0 x 31.0 cm

Alexander Turnbull Library, Auckland E-327-f-008

This untitled, unsigned work, thought to be that of Raper, has the words 'Glycine or Ononis' across the bottom — John Hunter's customary way to record the local Aboriginal names for the various species he drew. It shows a Ground Parrot even though Raper, as did most early illustrators, placed the parrot on a perch — it is one of the few parrots that never perches. Clearing and drainage of swamps, and removal of the heathlands so admired by Tench, have ensured that the Ground Parrot is no longer found in the Sydney district.



Figure 9

George Raper

'Bird of Port Jackson' 1789

Watercolour and ink 45.5 x 32.8 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15139

The bizarre looking, bald-headed Noisy Friarbird (and Honey Flower) is a large honeyeater. It was described by White (1790) as the 'Knob-fronted Bee-eater', but feeds on nectar, insects and some soft fruits. The honeyeaters evolved in Australia and would have been very unfamiliar to the First Fleeters.



Figure 10

George Raper

'Bird of Port Jackson' 1789

Watercolour and ink 47.4 x 33.3 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15149

With its striking two-toned facial skin, the Blue-faced Honeyeater lives in small communal groups. Today it is rarely seen in Sydney. Raper painted it with a Leafy Purple Flag, a native iris, which echoes the curve of its body and its blue face, and a sundew for balance. Fast drying and suitable for small paintings, watercolours were the medium of choice for ship's draughtsmen: officers, like Raper, with the time to paint.





Figure 11

George Raper

'Birds of Port Jackson' 1789

Watercolour and ink 47.6 x 32.8 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15143

The Red-backed Fairy-wren was one of the many beautiful small birds noticed by the First Fleeters; it no longer occurs as far south as Sydney. Raper chose to paint it with an odd partner, the Scared Kingfisher, a summer breeding migrant to Sydney from northern and inland Australia. However, the shapes make a fine composition, cleverly stabilised by the addition of the whimsical fly.



Figure 12

George Raper

'Mount-Pitt Bird, Norfolk Island' 1790

Watercolour and ink 33.5 x 49.5 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15170

Raper was stranded on Norfolk Island following the wrecking of the *Sirius* on 19 March 1790. With the extra mouths to feed, the penal colony, established the year before, was stricken with famine. They were sustained for five months by the thousands of petrels that returned to the island each year to nest on the two small mountains, Mt Pitt and Mt Bates. Adults were easily captured at night and their chicks dug from shallow burrows in the sandy soil. The Providence Petrel, named for the episode, was itself not so fortunate and within a few years was harvested to extinction on the island.





Figure 13

George Raper

'Snapper of Norfolk Island' 1790

Watercolour and ink 33.0 x 48.8 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15154

The boldly coloured Sweetlip Emperor was sought after on Norfolk Island, as it is today, but seldom caught. It was first described from Norfolk Island in 1848 and occurs north to New Guinea. By day the fish is bright and at night changes to drabber colours; it reaches nearly a metre in length. Raper drew it lying flat, in a bold, bright composition, but John Hunter hung it from a hook.



Figure 14

George Raper

'Birds of Norfolk Island' 1790

Watercolour and pencil 48.4 x 32.5 cm

Natural History Museum, London 15169

When Raper was shipwrecked on Norfolk Island he painted a male Scarlet Robin, which he described as 'not unlike a Robin, having a rich vermillion Breast'. It is not related to the European robins that Raper noted it resembles, but belongs to a unique Australian group. Raper teamed the robin with a Grey-headed Blackbird or Thrush, extinct since the 1970s, due to clearing, introduced rats and cats and, possibly, hybridisation with the introduced European Blackbird.